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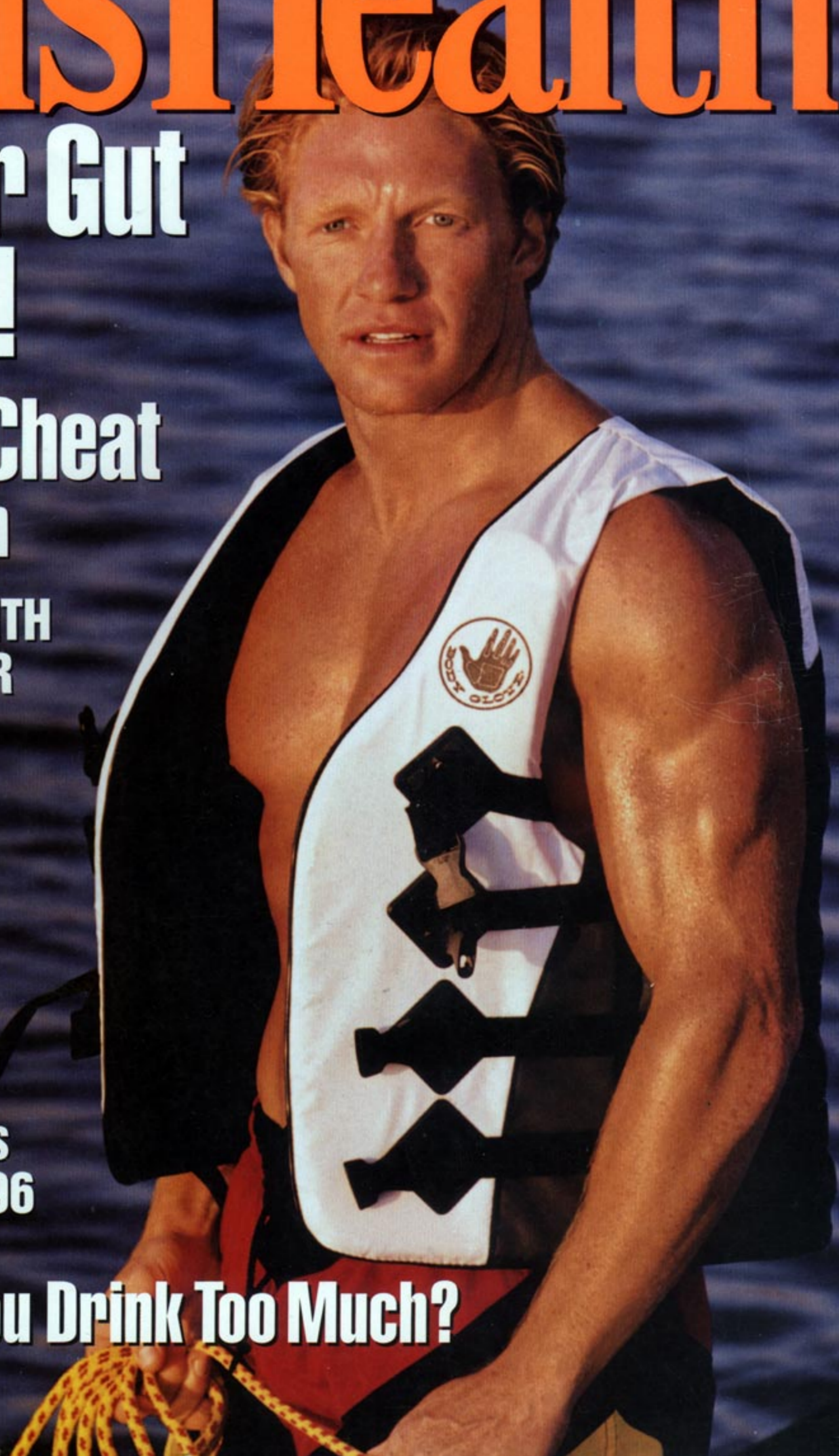
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Do You Drink Too Much?

Page 94

*Survival camp teaches you a lot about nature,
but even more about the nature of man. By Joe Kita*

School of Hard Rocks

THERE'S NOT MUCH TIME BEFORE THE SUN SETS, SO I CLEAR A CAMPSITE from the rubble, gather some old juniper branches and lay out my fire-starting tools. Here, in the desert of south-central Utah, this is done with the reverence and precision of an infantryman cleaning his rifle. Without a weapon in the battle against cold and fear, you are exposed, alone—maybe even dead. »

Photographed by Josh Bernstein

OUT-THERE DESPAIR: *After seven long days in the Utah desert, the author was a little sandblasted.*



I pick up my bow, a green piece of pliable willow as long as my arm, and tighten the string that connects the ends. When properly tuned, it's not unlike what you put to a fiddle, always ready to smoke a few notes and chase the blues.

My drill stick is 8 inches long, a sturdy piece of weathered sage that I've whittled to a point at each end. The sharper of these fits into a notched rock that I cup in my left hand, while the other slips into a hole in a flat "fire board" that I brace with my foot on the ground.

With the drill twisted into the string, I move the bow back and forth in long, steady strokes. This makes the drill spin in the board and eventually smoke. With whitened knuckles, I work and pray until a delicate ember is born. Carefully, I nudge it into a nest of tinder, hold it skyward and blow.

At first there's nothing, and I fear I've lost the spark. But then, with my next few breaths, I see a growing glow, smell smoke and feel the heat building between my palms. I blow harder, the furnace quivers, and with one last blast of oxygen, the bundle ignites. Fire!

I pound the ground and grunt, just like those cavemen did in *Quest for Fire*. Flicking a Bic or striking a match takes all the magic from the flame. Later, back home, I'd carry these same tools, like surgical instruments, to family picnics and neighbor kids' clubhouses. There, I'd make fire, and they'd look on in wonder and awe. Then I'd give them the bow and drill, and they'd make fire, too. And something deep inside us would smile.

Back in the desert, I fan my friend into a giant blaze. Since I have little to feed myself, I feed him with armfuls of gray kindling. As the night deepens, I imagine animal eyes, as prevalent as the stars in the sky, looking out at me from caves in the canyon walls. I lay my blanket as close to the fire as I dare, rest a hand upon my knife—those critters are hungry, just like me—and doze through an all-night watch.

Welcome to the Boulder Outdoor Survival School (BOSS). Contrary to what most people think, this isn't a military training camp for Ruby Ridge colonists. Guns, fatigues and Rambo snarls are discouraged. And any forewarned day of reckoning is personal rather than global.

What BOSS teaches, during guided desert treks ranging from 7 to 27 days, is how to cooperate with the land rather than how to subdue it. You learn to navigate by the sun, build a shelter out of forest debris, catch fish with your hands, weave string from plant stems and create fire from friction. It's an unforgettable lesson in primitive living, a refresher course for your savage soul.

Men rarely have to worry about survival nowadays. Food, water and shelter are in such abundance that they're taken for granted.

Self-preservation has become more a case of not getting caught in the wrong part of town, always wearing a seat belt and not eating too much fried food. As a result, we've grown fat and vulnerable on our own self-assurance.

But survival is more than living long enough to tap your 401(k). It's using your wits, the vast buried knowledge of your animal ancestors, to live but another minute, then another minute more. Sur-

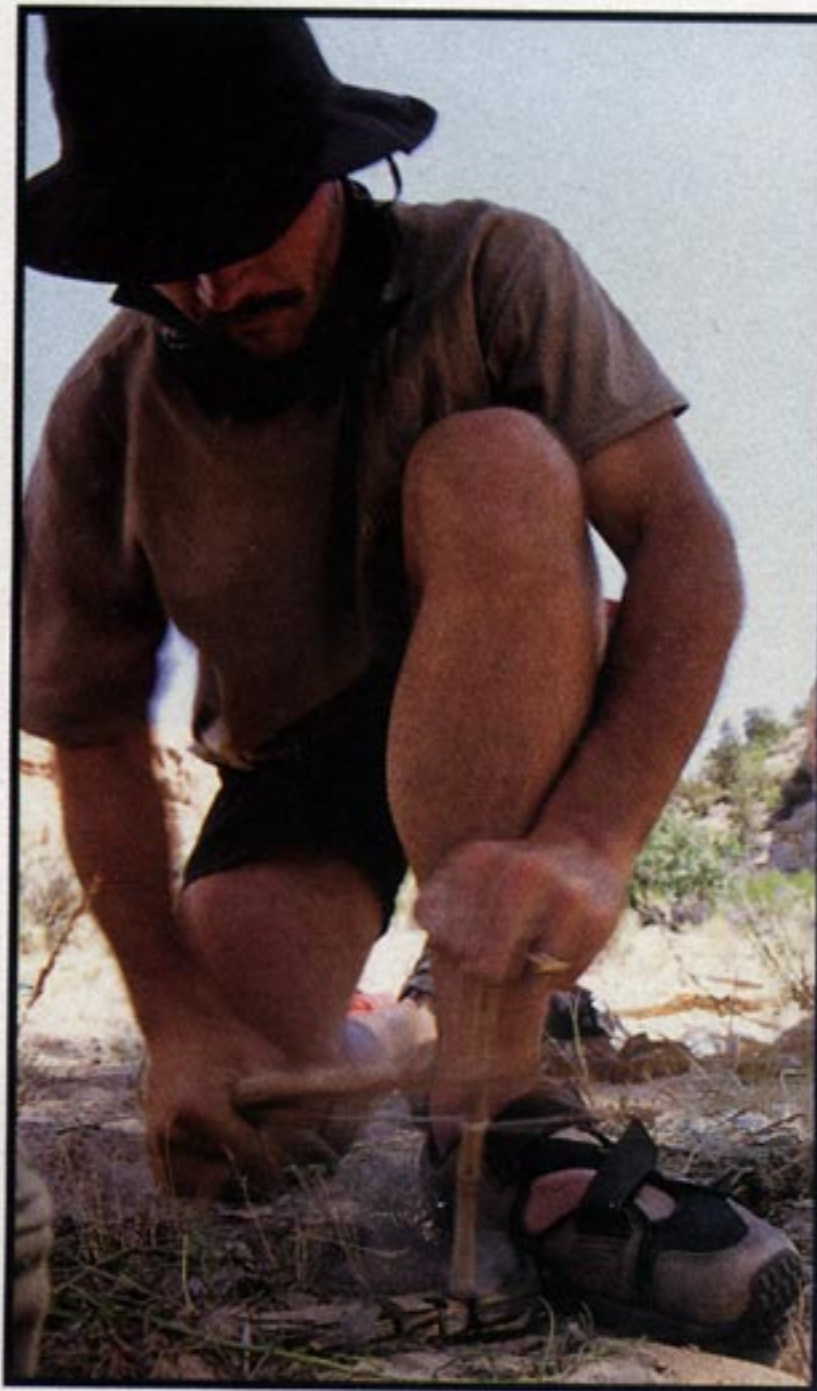
vival is awakening to the dawn, not with complaints of an aching back or an early appointment, but with elation that the night has passed and you have not.

There are 15 of us enrolled in this course. We range in years from 18 to 48, in hometowns from Omaha to Mexico City and in occupations from student to law-enforcement officer. Our seven-day, \$725 trip is divided into three parts: two days of rigorous hiking and acclimatizing called "impact," two days of intensive group travel and skills instruction and two days alone in the desert. We will hike almost 40 miles, from high forest to barren wasteland, through cactus thickets and a chest-high swamp, on just 1,500 calories or less per day. That's less than you'd get from eight large fig bars.

Since this is an exercise in self-reliance, tents, sleeping bags and flashlights aren't allowed. Before leaving BOSS's base camp in Boulder, Utah, we're stripped of watches, Walkmans and even sunglasses. ("We need to see your eyes out there.") We carry only knives, jackets and blue enamel cups. Our blankets and ponchos, which we've learned to roll into makeshift backpacks, remain behind for now. There's no food, no water, no visible means of dialing 911.

A van deposits us at the trailhead near Hell's Backbone, and we stand there pawing the dust like anxious horses. Another instructor, Beata Kubiak, delivers last-minute instructions, including how to, uh, crap in the outback. Since the BOSS wilderness credo is to leave a positive impact on the land (even campfire coals must be pulverized), this becomes a challenging maneuver. For 10 minutes, she discusses the options and the relative effectiveness of various natural "tissues." (Hint: Sagebrush and maple leaves are the backwoods equivalent of scented Charmin.) Funny, there wasn't any mention of *this* in the brochure.

Already, the actual experience of survival camp isn't sounding so romantic. Going from modern life to real life is, as BOSS field instructor Scott van Den Bergh says, "like a bug hitting a windshield at 60 mph." But that's what makes the program work. If your plane crashes in the Andes or your wife runs away with a Wal-Mart manager, you'll be unprepared. In such a situation, it's natural to panic, to drift toward despair. But if you are to survive, you must shake off the psychological paralysis and adapt. That's what "impact" is all about, having the false confidence knocked out of you but still finding the strength to prevail.



FIRE DRILL: *Since you can't flick a Bic, the only alternative you've got is to spend some time with the bow and drill.*

It is night in the Dixie National Forest. Sand Creek splashes and gurgles nearby, while the surrounding pines rustle in the breeze. For warmth, some of us strangers are huddled together like pups in a whelping box, while others are burrowed into makeshift beds of pine needles and boughs. But no one is comfortable. Without covers, we are trembling like spiderwebs in the 43-degree air, drifting in and out of sleep as if it were a warm cavern we could approach but never enter. I'm trying to remember the warning signs of hypothermia, wiggling my fingers and toes to prevent numbness. The guy next to me has frost on his sleeve.

Then comes light in the east, a dim glow, toward which 15 sets of hoot-owl eyes turn in private anticipation. It grows, as does our collective confidence that we will survive this first night in the wilderness and live to scoff at it. But when our savior peeks over the horizon, its brow is a pale yellow instead of reddish-orange. In silent despair, we watch as a full moon rises. The shivers return, even stronger now, and though we are but a single day into the course, some of us are already wondering why we've come.

Breakfast the following morning is scrambled thoughts of bacon and eggs. Gathered around a pinecone fire, which Scott sparked around 3 A.M. after one of us chattered for mercy, we wonder when he'll start the coffee and what a *full* day of impact might bring. Cold, hungry and eventually frustrated when neither beans nor schemes materialize, we dine instead on the scent of a Jeffrey pine, the sap of which smells like warm butterscotch.

Throughout this week, the normal questions you'd expect to have answered—How much farther? Where are we? When do we eat?—would be deftly avoided as if they were rattlesnakes sunning on the trail. The six instructors would simply shrug. At times, even *they* appeared lost. The net effect, whether by design or simple circumstance, was of our being adrift on the land, never knowing what to expect. Slowly, we realize that the guides are here only as safety nets—someone to start that fire when hypothermia threatens or splint a fracture should a ledge crumble. For the rest, *we are on our own*.

We trudge all day into the desert, a thin line of soldier ants with neither crumbs nor a destination to sustain us. Ten, fifteen, maybe fifty miles—who can tell? We are offered no food, and what little water we have is scooped from putrid potholes teeming with tadpoles.

Dan, a 48-year-old ex-drill sergeant, coughs, gags, then rolls over in the dust to vomit green slime. His 18-year-old son, Nathan, a behemoth of a boy, groans along with him, their intestines sharing the same waterborne plague. We console them as best as we can; our leaders are off trying to scout a way, or so they say, and we've been left alone in the withering afternoon to rest. But after hours pass, we get nervous. Federico, a concert promoter from Mexico, paces in circles. Naomi, a paling college grad from Brown Universi-

ty, covers her ears against the retching. And the rest of us stand like wooden Indians on a hill, our hands shading our eyes while we look for some sign of help.

We've all heard that survival camps are dangerous. The night before we left Provo, a local TV station broadcast a story about a 16-year-old boy who died during a nine-week wilderness-therapy program for troubled teens (not BOSS) in this same area. He reportedly went 11 days without food and succumbed to a bleeding ulcer.

We consider this as Dan and Nathan spill their guts. Our fears are exaggerated by our hunger, dehydration and fatigue. Suppose Dan, who's not in the best of shape, loses consciousness or has a heart attack? Suppose our guides don't return? Suppose this is the first test of our survival skills?

Just in case, we look for a campsite that fulfills the five W's, as Scott taught us: water, wood, weather (shelter), wiggles (no snakes or creatures) and widowmakers (nothing big that could fall on you). Our panic subsides amidst the planning, but before we decide to go it alone, we fan out one final time

and scan the canyons. That's when we spot Beata trekking back, and in the distance behind her, another guide named Josh Bernstein.

The whole week would be like this: little trials and little reliefs. "You have to push your comfort zone to learn how to survive under these conditions," Josh would explain later. "As long as it's not life-threatening, it builds character."

To bolster our spirits, Scott unveils our destination, a distant mesa called McGath Point. We feast upon this single scrap of knowledge as if it were a chocolate bar and draw enough energy from it to continue.

Eventually, in the purple twilight, we stumble onto its summit and discover the reward left there for us: bunches of bananas and gas cans filled with Gatorade. Beside them lie ponchos and blankets for the night ahead. Surprisingly, there is no feeding frenzy. Instead, we sit contentedly immobile, savoring and sipping. Normally, a banana isn't something to love, and warm Gatorade would be spat upon the ground, but under these skies, after this day, the two go together like champagne and caviar.

The next morning, the alarm clock sounds: A hummingbird is buzzing by our heads. We awake energized, certainly by the nourishment, but to an equal degree by this bizarre game we're playing. Survival is the ultimate amphetamine, a jousting match with death, however disguised. Ours is a staged battle, of course, but some of the raw elation from winning still filters through. And it's addictive.

Spirits are high as we set off from the Point, heading who knows where. Without hunger and thirst to blind us, we notice the land. Everyone else calls this a desert, but that's only accurate from afar.



POT LUCK: As if it's not tough enough finding food, you have to start the cookfire, too.

What I Learned at Survival School

23 things to remember after the plane goes down

- ▶ When you're hungry and thirsty, suck on a pebble. It'll trick your body into thinking it's eating something and moisten your mouth.
- ▶ Don't climb straight up hills. Instead, zigzag up slopes to conserve energy.
- ▶ Think of your stomach as a canteen. Fill it before leaving any water source.
- ▶ To make string, strip the fibers from a dried milkweed stalk and twist them together. You can also use hair.
- ▶ Mop up dew with a bandana and wring it into your mouth.
- ▶ When building a shelter against the cold, make it just big enough to squeeze inside. The less space your body has to heat, the warmer you'll stay.
- ▶ Follow game trails. Deer and other animals have a knack for

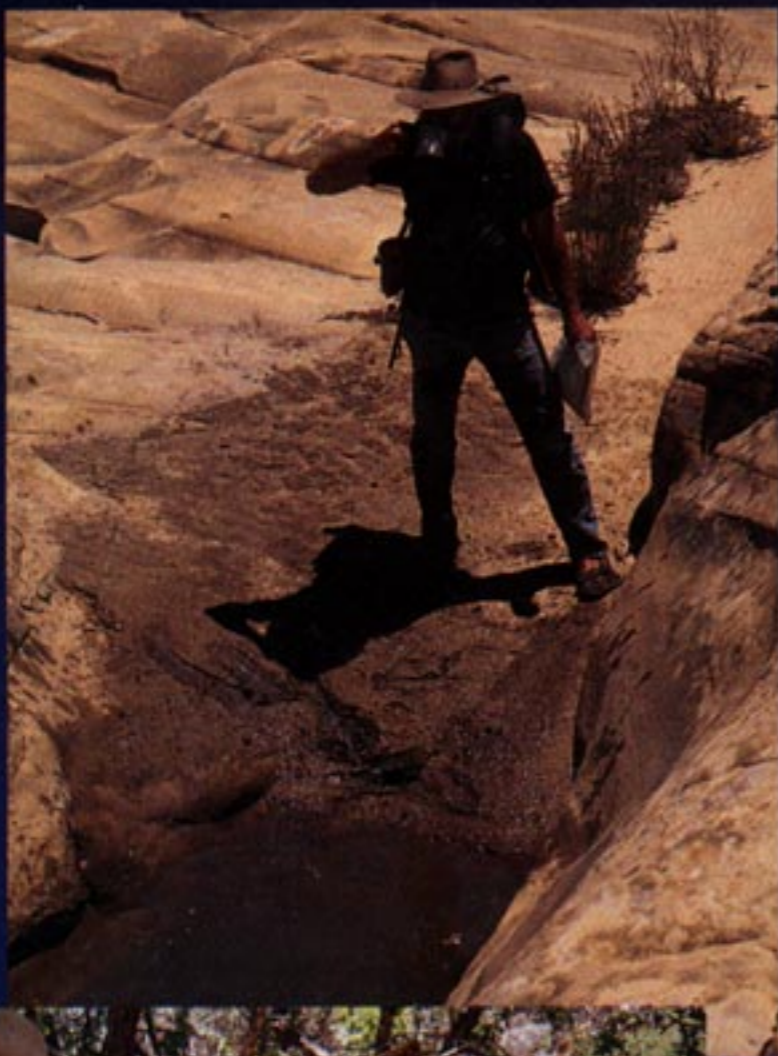
- scouting the easiest routes and finding water.
- ▶ Ear wax and nose grease are great natural lubricants for the fire drill.
- ▶ Stuff leaves and grass inside your shirt as insulation against the cold.
- ▶ Different shades of green in the distance can hint where there's water. Brighter greens mean more water.
- ▶ If a creek is dry, look for a bend and dig for water on the wider side of the curve.
- ▶ When a waterhole is devoid of living insects, avoid it. Its contents could be poisonous.
- ▶ On a cold night, cover your head. It's a major point of heat loss.
- ▶ The best place to cross a stream is usually its widest, and thereby shallowest, point.

- ▶ To find water, look for cottonwood trees. Each day they pump thousands of gallons into the air and need a plentiful water source to survive.
- ▶ To make a warm bed, build a fire on a flat, level spot. Let it burn out over a few hours, then sweep it clean of embers. Cover with a few inches of dry, loose soil and toast the night away.
- ▶ Birch trees like cool, moist places. Don't camp near them on a cold night.
- ▶ When hiking downhill, keep your knees bent slightly to lessen the strain on your legs.
- ▶ A hollow plant stem can serve as a good fire-blower.
- ▶ To determine direction, poke a stick into the ground and mark the end of its shadow. Relax for an hour or so, then mark the end of the new shadow.

- ▶ Draw a line between these two points. That's a rough east-west direction.
- ▶ To catch ground squirrels, prairie dogs and rabbits, chase them into their burrows. Then leave a snare over the hole, back off 20 to 30 feet, and wait for the animal to stick its head out. When it does, a quick pull on the line should trap it.
- ▶ A fire-warmed rock, tucked into a small sleeping shelter, will act as a portable heater.
- ▶ Deer feed for about 20 seconds, then raise their heads to look around. When stalking one, walk toward it for a count of 10 while it's grazing, then stop. Make no attempt to hide. The deer may look at you, but if you don't move, it won't run. Keep doing this until you're within striking range.



DUNE BUDDIES: *We were like soldier ants, only without crumbs or a destination.*



THEORY OF RELATIVITY: *To think that you've complained of black specks in the restaurant ice cubes or a lumpy hotel bed becomes absurdly embarrassing when you're out here.*



Down here, in its washes and slot canyons, there's a jungle of life. Fat with sweet spring rain, the cacti have burst into bloom. Patches of silver-blue sagebrush perfume the air. And down by the still-trickling creeks, cottonwood trees and cattails elbow each other for shore space.

To a survivalist, it's an all-you-can eat buffet. As Beata points out, the nuts from those pinecones and even the dethorned flesh of that prickly pear cactus are edible. She encourages us to graze as we go, and drops wild onions and peppermint into her pack for later.

The perfect mind-set out here is that of a wandering opportunist. When you find food, eat it; when there's shade, bathe in it; when there's material for fire-starting, stockpile it; and when you're lucky enough to discover a water hole, ignore the tadpoles playing there (in fact, water swarming with life may not be germ-free, but it *is* probably safer) and drink deeply. You do this because there's no guarantee you'll find these things later. And there is no death without regret.

Swallowed by this country and its towering sandstone shelves, we begin to understand why life passes so quickly. No one back home studies the cactus flower or drops a single pine nut upon his tongue. No one pauses amid all the planning and anticipating to live in the present.

"Be careful where you step," says Scott, calling us around a crusty, blackened patch of earth. "This is cryptogamic soil. It's the desert's way of preventing erosion. Looks like miniature sand castles, doesn't it?"

More than ever before, we begin to notice what is underfoot. When you whittle life down to its simplest forms, you're humbled by the richness and complexity of everything you see.

The beauty of this country is not all that's breathtaking. There are moments of real fear today, like when I'm edging along a cliff and watch a pebble fall away into the abyss. Or when we wade through a stinking swamp and realize that quicksand is real.

Exhausted and filthy by nightfall, we collapse into Cowboy Cave. In a moment of proud delirium, we catch some frogs, but the instructors tell us they're too skinny to eat. Instead, we roast cattail stalks and bubble rice and beans in billy pots, scouring our cups with spoons that we've carved.

Towards morning, a few of us awake to loud grunts and snuffles. For one long, sweaty moment, we think a bear is loose in the cave, and we reach for our knives. But it's just a neighbor snoring. I never thought I'd find that reassuring.

A few hours later, Scott is thigh-deep in the creek, teaching us how to catch fish with our hands. *Yeah, right, we think. And there's a Taco Bell around the bend.* First, he says, you crash down the middle of the stream, scaring the fish into their hiding places under the banks. Then, once they're secure, like ostriches with heads in the sand, you sneak up and feel for their bellies. As he explains this, he roots under the bank as if he's frisking an old sofa for change. Suddenly, he stops talking, pauses, and then with one primal yell pulls out a squirming 16-inch trout, its gills and



NATIVE AMERICAN GRAFFITI: *Wall scrawls like this decorate the canyons.*



CHUTE TO THRILL: When you're dirty and dazed, you'll do anything for a bath.

tail neatly speared between his fingers. He wraps it in moist grass and stows it for later.

Our journey resumes under a featureless sky. No clouds, no variance of blue, just the sun marching ever onward as we do. Besides the fishing lesson, we're also learning navigation—how to pick our way across this emptiness using the sun, buttes and topographical maps. Gazing at all the blue contour lines, I find it both amazing and depressing how even the middle of nowhere is so finely delineated. Fifty years from now, will it even be possible to escape civilization?

There's a waterfall somewhere around here. It plunges, as you can too, 25 feet into a shimmering green pool. The water is so cold that it steals your breath, and you surface bug-eyed and gasping. Then you bake on the rocks, settle your heart and scramble back up to do it again. This place isn't on the map, and the guides won't divulge its name. But we're coming to accept secrets like this and demand far fewer answers.

Cool and momentarily clean, we lounge in an oasis of shade. Mike Ryan, another instructor, squats before us with treasures in his hand. They're arrowheads, tiny jewels of red, gold and black, from a distant age when the Anasazi Indians lived here. To hold one is to touch their legend, to see them patiently chipping away under this very tree and to feel their pleasure at such finished perfection. As evidenced by their elaborate cliff dwellings and rock carvings, they didn't only survive here, they *thrived*.

When the noonday sun subsides, we press on, still plotting our own route but aided now by the hint of a game trail whispering through the brush. We head toward the confluence of Sand Creek and the Escalante River, where we'll camp for the night. Our progress, though, is painstakingly slow. We must wade the creek some two dozen times and bushwhack through thorny thickets that cat-scratch our arms and legs.

It is Steve's misfortune to be sick today. A Chicago cop, he tries to shrug it off like a flesh wound, but his pale complexion and stooped gait belie his intestinal pain. Later, after the virus passes, Steve confesses to a worrisome trait. His job, he said, is infecting him with a basic mistrust of man. "But I couldn't believe how many of you asked if I needed help," he added. "It reminded me that all people aren't bad."

Indeed, it's tough for evil and deceit to thrive here. There are no riches to covet, no power to manipulate for, not even any face worth saving. Simple living is honest living. That's why survival camps, when expertly conducted, can be therapeutic, not only for drug-troubled teens but also for wayward adults like us.

At dusk, Scott bakes his fish on a flat rock in the fire. It's the first meat we've seen or smelled in days. It's passed around the group as if it were lobster, each of us respectfully pulling off a shred of buttery white flesh. The head, skeleton, even the eyes are eaten. Nature wastes nothing, so what right have we?

It's one thing to survive in a group, but it's another thing to make it on your own. And that's the real challenge, the point to our being here. Among the Anasazi and other primitive tribes, you couldn't become a man without first having a "vision quest." Within a remote circle drawn in the sand, you meditated and fasted for days or even weeks until your path in life became clear. Whether this vision was heaven-sent or hallucinated didn't matter. Denial and survival made the boy a man.

Our course would end with an abbreviated vision quest. The in-

structors would string us out along the muddy Escalante, "isolating" us every quarter mile or so. We'd be told not to wander and left with some raisins and a plastic bag of blue-corn flour. Then, for two days and nights, we'd be alone with ourselves and the land.

Think for a minute. Can you recall the last time you were completely alone for more than the drive home? No radio, no television, no phone. None of us can. And although this is a part of the course we had once anticipated as a restful escape, now that it is at hand, we're no longer so sure.

We break camp and hike downriver, dropping off our compatriots one by one. I'm left in a stunning red-rock canyon, a private parlor for my game of desert solitaire. I sit in the dust and try to take it all in. Across the river, over the tops of the cottonwoods, is a delicate sandstone arch. An eye of blue sky, opened by the wind, looks out from beneath it. If this fragile bridge can survive, suspended for centuries, then maybe so can I.

Despite my nervousness, I spark a fire on my first try. To celebrate, I decide to make ash cakes for dinner. Scott said you take the bag of flour, add some water and knead it into dough. Then you fold a small piece over a few raisins and roast it. It sounds good but my water is dirty, the dough absorbs the crud from my hands and my baked cakes disintegrate into gritty crumbs. Disgusted, I break down and unwrap a mocha PowerBar—one that I had smuggled for just such an emergency. It tastes better than Godiva chocolate.

It's amazing how satisfied you can be on just a comparative morsel. My stomach has shrunk, but I'm not weak with malnutrition. Instead, I feel strong; invigorated and embarrassed by all the times I've complained of black specks in restaurant ice cubes or left food on my plate.

Beyond thinking and tending the fire, there's utterly nothing to do. All the next day, I watch birds flit through the canyon and think that if there's reincarnation, I'd like to be so blessed. I stare at a boulder's shadow and futilely try to see it move across the ground. I check if my silty brown bottle of river water has settled any. And I inspect my arms and legs, breaded a pale orange by the sandstone particles that bombard everything around here.

I come to the conclusion that man is incapable of doing nothing. To just sit here, even in this remarkable cathedral, is incredibly difficult and frustrating. Each of my muscles is drunk with adrenaline, poised for the unexpected, but nothing happens. Every time I look at the sun and see its lack of progress, I want to scream. My only epiphany is that I have it so much better back home than I thought and that I want this to end.

There's a road nearby, I know. I saw it on the map. Just follow the river for 3 or 4 miles and look for the power lines. Someone had asked Mike if anyone had ever fled, and he had laughed quietly. "Some do," he'd said, "but they usually come back, because around here finding the nearest road doesn't mean you'll find anyone anytime soon."

It's the last day of survival camp, and the plan is this: At dawn, the first person upriver gathers his belongings and wakes up the next, then they hike along to the third, and so on down the line.

I'm waiting, all damp and impatient, as if this is the senior prom and my limo is late. I've been waiting for hours—hell, since I got here—for this moment. I'm standing atop a rock in the brilliant morning sunshine looking up the trail for my friends, my heart beating fast with the promise of escape.

When I eventually spot them, I'm overcome with emotion, as if I'm being rescued. There's Dan, Nathan, Federico! We shake hands and slap backs like old war veterans, and then move on, stirring the rest. One by one, they emerge from the thickets and makeshift shelters in which they've lived—faces drawn, mosquito-bitten and dirty, but smiling nonetheless.

During the next hour, our gritty group swells to its original 15 members, but we are hard-shell beetles now instead of crushable ants. We no longer trudge with chins on our chests but walk with heads held high, full of confidence and determination. Our guides have left us to find our own way out. No problem. We look for broken twigs and sandal prints whenever we doubt our way. And when we ford the river, we do so not as wobbly individuals but as a sturdy hand-linked team.

Policeman Steve turns and jokes about his "vacation" being over. Laura, a registered nurse, shakes her head at having

chosen this over a luxury bicycling trip. And someone else computes that BOSS rang up around \$10,000 from this course, so there should be a tremendous brunch awaiting us in Boulder.

When the power lines finally come into view, our mood becomes electric. The talk turns to pizza (with bubbling cheese), steak (medium rare, from Sizzler), showers (steamy enough to wilt wallpaper) and clean sheets (all white and warm from the dryer).

We cross the river one final time and clamber up to a trailhead parking lot. We exchange congratulatory hugs with our guides, and for a moment stare like spotlight deer at the cars, the bathrooms, the posted trail rules . . . all this civilization.

There is a feeling of accomplishment, but it is not cocky triumph. There is collective relief, but it does not stem from any lucky deliverance. We all survived something this week, if only a journey into ourselves.

"You know, I hated every minute of this," admits Steve, sitting in the van that would ferry us back. "I never thought it would end. But now that it has, I know I'm a better person because of it."

Most of us nod our heads in weary agreement. I can't, with a clear conscience, urge anyone to do this. It would be the most difficult and disturbing week of his life, and he would curse me for it. But at the same time, with honest conviction, I want *everyone* to do this. It would be the most educational and empowering week of your life, and it could change you forever. ♦

For more information about this and other primitive-living experiences, call Boulder Outdoor Survival School at (800) 335-7404.



NO FISH STORY: Learn to snag fish with your fingers. This trout was hooked by hand.